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Aide's Resignation Raises Question on Casey Role

Hill Probers See Deeper CIA Involvement in Iran-Contra Affair Than Acknowledged

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In early 1985, one of CIA Director William J. Casey's two special assistants told associates that he was resigning to raise money for the private network supervised by White House aide Oliver L. North that was aiding the Nicaraguan contras, according to intelligence sources.

Congress, despite opposition of President Reagan, had recently barred all U.S. agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency, from providing direct or indirect support to military operations in Nicaragua. In the face of the restrictions, the Reagan administration was looking for ways to keep supplies and arms flowing to the rebels.

What congressional investigators say they have discovered in examining the period after the aid was cut off is not conclusive evidence of a CIA or Casey master plan to arm the rebels, but a series of activities, carried out by present or former intelligence operatives, that add up to a deeper CIA involvement than has been acknowledged.

A The Casey assistant who quit in 1985 was Ben B. Wickham Jr. He had served from 1982-84 as CIA station chief in Nicaragua, and was described as a believer that the effort to assist the anti-Sandinista rebels should continue despite a congressional ban on U.S. military aid.

At 44, Wickham was not eligible for retirement benefits, and former associates say they assumed that he left with Casey's encouragement and with assurances that he could return to the agency. An associate said Wickham then "disappeared—he didn't even leave a blip on the radar screen."

According to one report, which a CIA spokesman declined to confirm or deny, Wickham is back at work at the agency.

Wickham's activities add to questions about Casey's role in support of the contras carried out both inside and outside his agency.

In December 1985, Congress allowed the CIA to provide communications equipment training and advice to the rebels, but left questions as to how much advice could be given on logistical matters.

A According to sources, the former CIA station chief in Costa Rica, Tomas Castillo, has testified under oath before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that he cleared his activities with his superiors when he helped direct delivery of military equipment to rebels in southern Nicaragua during the ban.

A However, his immediate superior, Allan Fires, has testified that he was unaware of Castillo's activities.

During the ban, the CIA maintained personnel and helicopters at three contra training bases at Aguacate, Cim and Yamales in Honduras. Although missions into northern Nicaragua were launched from these bases, CIA officials maintained that their personnel took no part.

It was during this period that the CIA and Marine Lt. Col. North eliminated as a rebel leader Eden Pastore, also known as "Commandante Zero," by selectively delivering military supplies to contra groups along the southern Nicaraguan border who defected from Pastore. Pastore was considered by agency officials and North to be too independent.

The C123 cargo plane that was shot down in Nicaragua last Oct. 5 was one of those being coordinated by North and Castillo. It was delivering weapons to rebel leaders who had divorced themselves from Pastore, according to congressional sources.

The role of Casey and his agency has emerged as one of the main subjects of the House and Senate investigations into the Iran-contra affair. Casey is now recovering from complications resulting from removal of a cancerous tumor from his brain last December and has been unable to answer questions of investigators. He is not expected to be healthy enough to testify.

During the ban on U.S. military aid, a group of former U.S. military and intelligence officers raised money, purchased arms abroad, set up bank accounts in Switzerland and Panama, chartered and bought ships and planes to carry weapons and supplies and organized logistical support for the contras.

To provide secrecy, the operation was run through an array of shell companies, cut-outs and secret bank accounts. Congressional investigators are now attempting to determine whether this complex structure could have been put into place without the support of senior CIA officials.

According to the Tower board's report on the Iran-contra affair, North's involvement in raising funds and providing operational support for the contras grew steadily after 1984, while he was on the staff of the National Security Council (NSC).

The Tower board report portrays North as having regular contact with Casey and keeping him apprised of the contra resupply operation

and U.S. arms sales to Iran. In addition, North had frequent contact with other present or former CIA operatives.

In 1985 and 1986, North served with a Casey protege, Duane Clarridge, on a small, operations-level group on terrorism that met at the NSC. Clarridge had been selected by Casey earlier to handle Central America and became the organizer of the contra force in the period the administration was allowed to organize and arm the resistance force.

He also was involved in its most controversial activities, including the 1983 mining of Nicaraguan harbors.

North was also in contact with Castillo through secure telephones that North had acquired from the NSC for use in his role as coordinator of counterterrorism for the council.

Also linked to the private network and to North is a former CIA operative, Thomas G. Clines, who reportedly resigned from the agency in the late 1970s. Several years later, a company in which Clines had an interest pleaded guilty to a charge related to overbilling the Defense Department.

In November 1985, a woman testified under oath in a Charleston, S.C., civil suit that Clines told her he did work of an undisclosed nature for the National Security Council.

Congressional investigators are looking into published reports that Clines was involved in arms shipments to the contras through Portugal, and that he arranged for chartering of the Danish freighter *Erria*, which allegedly carried a cargo of weapons, thought to have been received by the contras, to Honduras from Europe.

North referred to the *Erria* as "my Project Democracy ship," and last May offered its services to the CIA. But operations-level officers at the agency reportedly turned down the offer in blunt terms, citing Clines' alleged involvement with the ship.

Wickham, who former associates describe as an intelligence officer with a promising future, announced that he was going to work for the private network after a nine-month stint as one of two special assistants who had "across-the-board" responsibilities for the director, according to one source.

Associates assumed that Casey and North had arranged for Wickham to work in one of the private companies that North loosely referred to as "Project Democracy" or, on other occasions, "Democracy Inc.," the source said.

Wickham did not reveal which of the private companies he would be working for or what tasks he would be performing, other than to say he planned to specialize in fund-raising in Europe.

Wickham had been assigned previously to Prague and, from 1971-74, to Tehran, where he was listed in a State Department directory as a reserve foreign service officer.